The War Fifty Years Ago

Military Activities Increase on Both Sides---Federal Troops Cross Potomac, and Confederates Begin Massing at Manassas---Colonel Ellsworth's Assassination Stirs the North---Grant, an Obscure Ex-Captain of the Old Army, Makes Application For a Commission---His Wonderful Subsequent Career and His Character Analyzed---John C. Fremont Becomes a Major General, While Grant Acts as a Clerk---Butler Coins His Famous Phrase, "Contraband of War."

By JAMES A. EDGERTON.

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As the time of actual armed conflict drew near military activities on both sides increased. Troops were pouring daily into Washington and Richmond and were being massed at convenient points along the border. Both combatants were facing much the same difficulties. Each had to create an army and navy, organize the finances to meet the immense outlays of war and prepare to equip, feed and drill hundreds of thousands of fighting men. It was a supreme test for both, a test that in the end weakened the north and left the south exhausted.

The week ending May 27 saw the first definite movements of troops from the two capitals, 10,000 Federals crossing into Virginia and occupying Alexandria and Arlington and 5,000 Confederates concentrating at Manassas. These were the beginnings of the two armies that on July 21 fought the first battle of Bull Run. Other important developments of the week were the secession of North Carolina on May 21; the popular vote on secession in Virginia, May 22; the assassination of Colonel Ellsworth, May 24; the first application of Ulysses S. Grant for a command on the same date; the announcement on May 26 that in five days the mail service to the seceded states would be cut off; the Union uprising in western Virginia; the commissioning of John C. Fremont as major general and the appointment of General Irvin McDowell to head the army of the Potomac on May 27; also on that day the meeting of the border states convention. During this week General Butler took command at Fortress Monroe, pushed his troops forward to Newport News and refused to return fugitive slaves on the ground that they were "contraband of war." The campaign was now beginning to assume form on both sides.

ULYSSES S. GRANT, WHO APPLIED FOR COMMISSION IN ARMY MAY 24, 1861.

Border States Retained.

The going out of North Carolina was not unexpected. While voting for the Union up to the firing on Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call for troops, these two events, as in the case of Virginia, turned her in a day. The boundaries of the Confederacy were now certainly defined. While the people of Tennessee did not formally ratify secession until later, it was admitted on all sides that she was out of the Union, making eleven seceded states in all. As for the border states, Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri and the part of Virginia west of the mountains, the north had won her battle to hold them. During this very week the border states convention met at Frankfort with John J. Crittenden in the chair. Only Kentucky and Missouri were represented, but the preponderance of sentiment was distinctly for the Union. The people of western Virginia were already moving for separation from the Old Dominion, and General McClellan was preparing to throw his troops across the river from Ohio. As for Maryland, she had again become quiet, and troops were passing through Baltimore without molestation and were even being cheered.

There was still to be trouble in Missouri, including one campaign in the summer of 1861 and guerrilla warfare throughout the contest. During this very week, on May 22, a mob at St. Joseph tore down the stars and stripes.

While there was little of the spectacular in the holding of the border states, it counted for more to the north than the winning of many battles. Had Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri seceded, who can tell the outcome of the struggle?

Some of the more radical anti-slavery men at the north were disposed to criticise Mr. Lincoln for not taking a bolder stand against slavery in the beginning of the war. But Lincoln faced this very problem of the border states, and in the light of subsequent events history gives him full credit for having handled a difficult situation in a most prudent and statesmanlike manner.

On May 22 the people of Virginia voted on the ordinance of secession. While the poll was not heavy, it was strongly in favor of the proposition east of the mountains and as emphatically the other way in what is now West Virginia.

Union Troops Cross Potomac.

Immediately following this election the Union troops began to move forward all along the line, General Butler assuming command in the extreme east, General McClellan in the west, General Patterson with his Pennsylvania soldiers preparing to attack Harpers Ferry and the main body of troops, forming the Army of the Potomac, crossing the river from Washington. This movement started on the night of May 23, and the next day there were 10,000 boys in blue on the Virginia side of the river, chiefly at Alexandria and Arlington. General Sandford was first in command, issuing a proclamation to the people of Virginia, but on May 27 he was supplanted by General Irvin McDowell, who later was to fight in both of the battles of Bull Run and who was to retain command of the Army of the Potomac until supplanted by McClellan.

One tragic incident attended this transfer. Colonel E. Elmer Ellsworth with his 1,200 firemen zouaves was ordered to occupy Alexandria. Seeing a Confederate flag flying over the Marshall House, Ellsworth entered the hotel and asked a bystander whose flag it was. The man, who afterward turned out to be Jackson, the proprietor, said he did not know. Ellsworth thereupon mounted to the roof, took down the flag, wrapped it about his body and descended, only to be shot dead by Jackson, who was lurking in a dark corner of the hall. The assassin was instantly killed by one of the soldiers accompanying his colonel.

Ellsworth Hero of the Hour.

The deed sent a wave of grief and indignation over the north. Ellsworth became the hero of the hour. I suppose more babies were named for him than for any other national idol, except four or five of our greatest presidents and Henry Clay. Ellsworth was given an imposing funeral in New York city, and a regiment was made up in his honor, composed of one man from each town in the Empire State.

At the time of his death Colonel Ellsworth was twenty-four years old. He had aspired to West Point, but poverty prevented. Managing to procure an education, however, he studied law; but, military ardor getting the best of him, he organized a company of zouaves in Chicago and trained them to such efficiency that they gained prizes throughout the land. Ellsworth was an ardent supporter of Lincoln and accompanied him east. At this time he planned a reorganization of the militia. When the first call for troops came Ellsworth hastened to New York and organized his famous zouaves from the New York firemen.

JOHN C. FREMONT, MADE MAJOR-GENERAL MAY 27, 1861.

In the excited state of the northern mind the romantic character of Ellsworth, his youth, his gallant deed and the manner of his death caught the popular imagination. Perhaps we are all sentimentalists at bottom, and this tragedy, like the firing on the flag at Sumter and the massacre of Massachusetts troops in Baltimore on the anniversary of the battle of Lexington, appealed to this latent sentiment.

Grant Applies For Commission.

On the same day that Ellsworth was shot an unknown ex-army captain working in his father's leather store at Galena, Ill., applied to Secretary of War Cameron for a commission in the Union army. He modestly said he thought he could command a regiment, as he had fought already in the Mexican war and served in a Pacific post. Afterward he had resigned and farmed it for a while, finally gravitating into the leather store because he had not made out on the farm he called "Hardscrabble." The name of this man was Ulysses S. Grant. He afterward got his commission through the influence of Representative Elihu B. Washburne. On this particular 24th of May poor Grant was serving as a sort of extra clerk in the outer office of the adjutant general of Illinois. He knew many things, but was stoop shouldered and almost shabby; hence was rated by his outward appearance rather than by any inward aptitude. God knew him, and perhaps in a dim way he knew himself.

To us Grant is known as the silent man. To his intimates in Galena before the outbreak of the war he was anything but silent. He could talk

GENERAL JOSEPH E. JOHNSTON, FAMOUS CONFEDERATE LEADER, WHO ON MAY 17, 1861, TOOK COMMAND OF FORCES IN AND ABOUT HARPERS FERRY.

long and interestingly. Moreover, when he did give way to loquacity he had information and ideas to impart. As an instance, he once presided over a war meeting in Galena. Instead of indulging in the bombast and froth of the average speaker of the day, miscalled eloquence, Grant got down to brass tacks, talked about the actual hardships the soldiers would have to undergo, but still convinced them that it was worth while. Superficial people could not measure such a man, but history has measured him at least in part.

Years ago I met an old man who said that while on an Ohio river steamboat early in the war he had observed an army officer of striking appearance. The thing that distinguished him was the manner in which he closed his mouth. This friend, who was a rather keen observer of men, said he had never seen a man shut his mouth so hard. He was so struck that he inquired the officer's name and was told it was Grant, though it was not till years later that he identified him with the famous general.

Personally I cannot get over a peculiar feeling in regard to Grant, a feeling that I hold for no other Americans except Lincoln and Thomas Paine. I cannot explain it wholly, and yet I cannot argue it away. It is that Grant was a greater man than any of us have yet understood. I never saw him, was not impressed by his political associations and heard most of the derogatory things said about him a quarter of a century ago. Yet the feeling for him grew. It was at first vague, but with the passage of time has become more definite. It was that Grant truly belonged to the family of great souls; that he had a supreme work to do and did it. Grant's fame is of the stuff that will stand the acid test of centuries.

War is a stern winnower that separates human chaff from wheat. On May 24, 1861, Grant in the eyes of men was a nobody. Hundreds of thousands of his inferiors made more show and more noise. The war wind blew, and the fame of these went with it, but that of Grant remained. Grant never could make money, but neither could Lincoln, neither could most of the supremely great men in history.

Fremont Made Major General.

While Grant was trying for even a small chance to give his military experience to the country John C. Fremont, who had been the Republican candidate for president five years earlier, was appointed a major general. Great hopes were entertained for his future. He had been a notable engineer and explorer, the respected standard bearer of a new cause that later had succeeded, and he was the son-in-law of Thomas H. Benton. Yet Fremont's military service added little to his prestige. Truly war is a sifter of men.

This week saw little actual fighting, except a skirmish at Arlington between some New York troops and a few Confederates and a handful of prisoners taken at Alexandria. Yet it ended notably. On May 27 occurred a cluster of events of first class importance. That was the day on which Fremont's advancement was announced, likewise that on which definite news came that the western end of Virginia was determined to break away and on which the New York Herald named it "New Virginia." On that day Butler's men took Newport News and McDowell was made head of the Army of the Potomac. On that day the newspapers announced that the end of May would see the discontinuance of southern mails. On that day the border states convention met. Most fateful of all, on that day came news that the Confederate troops were concentrating at Manassas.